

UNITED NATIONS
General Assembly
FORTY-SEVENTH SESSION
Official Records

SPECIAL POLITICAL COMMITTEE
20th meeting
held on
Wednesday, 18 November 1992
at 3 p.m.
New York

SUMMARY RECORD OF THE 20th MEETING

Chairman:

Mr. KHOUINI

(Tunisia)

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Distr. GENERAL
A/SPC/47/SR.20
2 December 1992
ENGLISH
ORIGINAL: FRENCH

The meeting was called to order at 3.15 p.m.

AGENDA ITEM 105: PROGRAMME PLANNING

1. The CHAIRMAN informed the members of the Committee that upon expiration, on 17 November, of the deadline for submission of comments on revised programmes 1, 2, 4 to 6, 8, 35, 36 and 38 of the medium-term plan for 1992-1997, he had received communications from Brazil, China, Colombia, Cuba, the United Kingdom, on behalf of the 12 members of the European Community, and the United States. The communication from the United Kingdom had suggested that the Special Political Committee send a single message to the Fifth Committee indicating that a consensus had been reached in support of the Secretariat's proposals regarding the proposed revisions to the medium-term plan as modified by the Committee for Programme and Coordination at its resumed thirty-second session. However, as he had received five other communications conveying the views of Brazil, China, Colombia, Cuba and the United States on some of the programmes referred to the Committee, he proposed to send a letter to the Chairman of the Fifth Committee transmitting all of the communications received and to circulate that letter, together with its attachments, as a document of the Committee, as had been decided at the third meeting on 20 October.

2. It was so decided.

AGENDA ITEM 76: QUESTIONS RELATING TO INFORMATION (continued) (A/SPC/47/L.9 and L.10)

(a) REPORT OF THE COMMITTEE ON INFORMATION (A/47/21)

(b) REPORT OF THE SECRETARY-GENERAL (A/47/463)

3. Mr. ADOUKI (Congo) said that, although the Secretary-General's work had been fruitful, there was a deplorable lack of consistency in his report. Neither the cause of information nor the authority of the department responsible were served by the report's many faults: the absence of tables on financial resources, the lack of specific information on the information centres, their elimination or their absorption by UNDP or on their budgets or the support of the host countries, not to mention other questions which were hardly touched on: the prospects of the Department of Public Information, apartheid (the black South African community still did not have the right to vote), balance in recruitment, equality of working languages, etc. He in no way questioned the integrity of the Secretariat staff, which was itself complaining of difficult working conditions, aggravated by the restructuring process, which was creating a climate of uncertainty that was clearly unfavourable to the cause of information at the United Nations.

4. Welcoming the new spirit which made open and constructive discussion in the Committee possible, he deplored the fact that the world of information and

(Mr. Adouki, Congo)

communications remained ruled by marketing standards and that, for example, a conquest of radio space by the network of industrialized countries was taking place in spite of the lip service paid by the media of the advantaged countries to pluralism, respect for difference of opinion, freedom of the press and free movement of ideas. The appeal for a new world information order was more timely than ever, and the developing countries needed assistance or rather a partnership of a new kind to develop their infrastructures in that field.

5. His country was endowed with a free and pluralistic press, of which the Supreme Information and Communications Council was the constitutional guarantor; it nevertheless needed training and assistance, particularly from the United Nations, to strengthen its structures in the information field. Unfortunately, the United Nations was hardly fulfilling the hopes that had been placed in it, as it had left vacant the post of director of its Brazzaville Information Centre, although that post had been mandated by a General Assembly resolution, and had been for years a source of valuable documentation not only for the Congo but for the neighbouring peoples of Angola and Namibia. It was unfortunate that the United Nations, which had played so active a role in decolonization, was now abandoning that effort, especially in the light of the fact that other United Nations Information Centres - such as those at Nairobi, Beirut and Mexico City, for example - were experiencing the same problems.

6. Welcoming the fact that the problem had been solved in India and that a director had been appointed for the newly created centre at Windhoek, he called for an end to the administrative malfunctioning that was impeding the solution of the Brazzaville Centre situation even though the Congolese Government had agreed to the appointment of a director more than a year ago. He would not go into the other questions relating to information on which his delegation had stated its position on 7 April 1992 during the fourteenth session of the Committee on Information.

7. Mr. SALIMI (Afghanistan) said that the dramatic changes that had put an end to the polarization of the world into two military and political blocs, and to totalitarian regimes and the cold war, had revealed the importance of the flow of information and its role in shaping events everywhere in the world. But economic disparities affected the power of the media: the developing countries were still saturated with information originating with the media of the developed countries. That being so, the establishment of a new, fairer and more balanced information and communications order aimed at strengthening peace and international understanding was inseparable from the establishment of a new international economic order, and the United Nations Department of Public Information acting in concert with other international organizations, including the Joint United Nations Information Committee and the United Nations Information Centres should do everything possible to promote such a new order.

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(Mr. Salimi, Afghanistan)

8. While welcoming the valuable information activities of the United Nations in support of international peace and security, world disarmament and peace-keeping operations, he was of the opinion that the Department of Public Information should expand its cooperation with the pool of news agencies of non-aligned countries (NANAP) and establish similar cooperation with other information institutions of the non-aligned countries such as the Broadcasting Organization of the Non-aligned Countries (BONAC), the International Islamic Agency (IINA) and the Islamic States Broadcasting Organization (ISBO).

9. He reaffirmed his delegation's support of the two draft resolutions recommended to the General Assembly by the Committee on Information entitled "Information in the Service of Humanity" and "United Nations Public Information Policies and Activities", and welcomed the increase in the number of members of the Committee on Information, in which his delegation hoped to participate soon.

10. Ms. CAMARA (Côte d'Ivoire) stressed the important role of the Department of Public Information, truly the showcase of the United Nations in a radically changing world, with information playing a central role in the success of any undertaking. The Department served a threefold purpose, that of disseminating knowledge about the United Nations, that of promoting a new international information and communication order by strengthening North-South cooperation and promoting freedom of the press, and that of ensuring the presence and prestige of the United Nations, in all regions, if not in all Member States, through its information centres. The Department also performed a most useful task by fostering awareness of various dangers threatening the planet, promoting human rights and fundamental freedoms, and contributing towards the maintenance of international peace and security.

11. Expressing appreciation of the scope and diversity of the Department's activities and, in particular, of its coverage of the Earth Summit, she expressed the hope that the same level of information quality would be maintained at forthcoming international events such as the World Conference on Human Rights to be held in Vienna in June 1993, the Conference on Population and Development to be held in Cairo in 1994, the World Conference on Women scheduled to be held in Beijing in 1995, the Summit on social development and the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations.

12. In order to reach the largest possible public, publications such as UN Chronicle, Development Forum and Africa Recovery had to reflect all cultural sensibilities in a balanced manner and to respect the parity of working languages. With a view to fostering a more constructive spirit of solidarity, the Department should do still more to promote exchanges of experience and to publicize efforts made and successes achieved in various parts of the world so as to correct the all-too-often negative image conveyed by the international press. The difficulties encountered by Africa Recovery, a publication which faithfully reflected African realities and served as a useful antidote to a potentially paralysing "Afro-pessimism", were therefore to be deplored.

(Ms. Camara, Côte d'Ivoire)

13. An important aspect of the Department's task was summed up in the title of draft resolution I proposed by the Committee on Information, "Information in service of humanity", aimed principally at improving the information systems and communication techniques of the developing countries. Those countries were being flooded with second-hand information, and the Department could do a great deal to facilitate their press agencies' access to original sources, especially as regards information relating to the Organization's activities in connection with development and with the peaceful settlement of conflicts. The Department should continue to organize training courses for journalists from developing countries, and meetings and seminars should be organized to encourage cooperation between press agencies of the North and those of the South with a view to reducing existing disparities between them. She wished to thank the Department of Public Information and UNESCO for organizing the seminar at which the Windhoek Declaration, fully endorsed by her country, had been adopted.

14. It was surprising that the question of information centres was barely touched upon in the report of the Secretary-General although it had been at the very heart of the debate in the Committee on Information in April 1992. Reiterating the concerns she had expressed earlier in connection with document A/AC.198/1992/4, she asked why more than two thirds of the budget allocated to information centres were absorbed by 12 centres located in countries of the North, the remaining third being shared between 49 centres, which, incidentally were threatened with being placed under the tutelage of UNDP, and why financial contributions were requested from developing countries while wealthy countries did not have to contribute a penny. Information centres were like United Nations embassies to the developing countries. They were essential to the accomplishment of the Secretary-General's new tasks. Besides supporting Member States in their efforts to achieve development and to preserve peace, the United Nations presence also had a dissuasive effect, and the centres' directors could play an essential "preventive diplomacy" role in preventing conflicts. They should carry a reflection of some of the prestige surrounding the first international civil servant of whom they were the representatives.

15. In view of the multitude of tasks assigned to the Department of Public Information, her delegation was concerned by the slenderness of the means available to the Department and felt that some thought should be given, within the restructuring context, to ways and means of enabling the Department to fulfil its threefold function as a showcase of the United Nations, as the ambassador of the Secretary-General to Member States and as an effective tool for the promotion of a free and democratic press within a new international information and communication order in the service of the well-being of mankind.

16. Mr. DAMICO (Brazil) expressed his delegation's concern in connection with the restructuring of the Department of Public Information and the changes made in the Department's mandate and in the scope of its operational activities,

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(Mr. Damico, Brazil)

such as the incorporation of sectors of the former Office of Research and Collection of Information and the Publications Board. The Department's task was already a heavy one and committing its scarce resources to activities whose mandates had not yet been reviewed by the Committee on Information should be avoided. Until the present, the Department's activities had consisted mainly in promoting awareness of the work of the United Nations among the public at large. Henceforth, the Department apparently would be required to increase the Organization's awareness of political and other developments taking place in Member States, especially through the collection of information by United Nations Information Centres.

17. At the latest meeting of the Committee on Information members had stressed their commitment to the basic principles of General Assembly resolution 46/73 A on "Information in service of mankind". They had unanimously acknowledged that an unhindered flow of information was one of the premises of democratic societies and had recognized that a lower level of development had a negative impact on the capacity to disseminate or have access to information. They had recognized the need to redress the situation by furthering international cooperation, especially in the field of communication infrastructure.

18. His country had produced technologies capable of meeting international standards and was in a position to promote cooperation activities with other developing countries. His Government had made suggestions concerning the utilization of funds and the establishment of a system for information exchange on ongoing and planned projects supported by United Nations agencies.

19. With regard to the proposed fusion of United Nations Information Centres with UNDP field offices, he said that any action in that area should be reviewed by the Committee on Information and the General Assembly.

20. Another point that deserved close attention was that while some interim offices had recently been opened in Republics of the former Soviet Union, the provisions of General Assembly resolution 46/73 aimed at recapacitating existing information centres and opening new ones in Member States had not been implemented. The situation provided a good opportunity for determining whether decisions relating to information centres could be taken at the discretion of the Secretariat or were subject to the approval of the General Assembly.

21. In conclusion, he commended the Department of Public Information for its tireless efforts in publicizing the activities and results of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and suggested that the Secretariat should issue a report containing an evaluation of the system-wide information programme for the Conference.

22. Mr. MZALE (United Republic of Tanzania) said that his delegation welcomed the work accomplished by the Department in the course of the year. It had not merely fulfilled the tasks traditionally entrusted to it, despite limited resources and despite the increasing demands placed upon it, but had implemented the General Assembly resolutions on priority issues while endeavouring to confront the challenges created by the new climate of international relations.

23. None the less, much remained to be done. The new challenges facing the international community demanded fresh approaches and required the Department to adopt a new conceptual framework for assessing and organizing its future work. However, that situation was arising at a time when the Department's capacity to accommodate new demands was reaching its limits, and it was doubtful whether a more flexible approach to the deployment of limited resources and the integration of the information centres with field offices of UNDP would bring about significant improvements. On the contrary, it was to be feared that the growing demands placed by Member States on the Department, and its efforts to meet those requirements, would endanger the results achieved if they were not accompanied by the necessary resources. It was thus imperative that Member States pledged their full cooperation and financial support to the Department.

24. The Department was now going to have to carry out its activities in a period of change in which new challenges were appearing. In the past, information, controlled by the rich nations, had been constantly manipulated in order to serve the interests and prejudices of those countries and to suppress or marginalize any aspiration which might run counter to them. That inability to disseminate objective news in numerous areas in which humanity had been put to the test had led to countless sufferings and deaths. Currently, the market economy and the principles underlying the Western democracies were regarded as formulas to be universally applied in order to solve the innumerable problems facing humanity. It might be asked, however, what useful values and experience from the past would be neglected and rejected. What was certain was that information would play a role in that regard.

25. Disparities in the field of information and communication between developing and developed nations were highly damaging to humanity as a whole. Accordingly, cooperation between developed and developing countries in the interests of reducing inequalities in information flows, assistance in establishing the infrastructures and capabilities the developing countries needed to develop their own information and communication policies, and the principles of freedom of the press and information were of vital importance. For that reason the current system of communication and information, which was dominated by the developed countries and based on the values and interests of the industrialized nations, must be restructured in order to take full account of the values and interests of the developing countries.

26. Mr. YOUGH (Nigeria) said that the moral obligations entered into by the developed and the developing countries in the interests of cooperation aimed at reducing disparities in the fields of information and communication should not be overlooked. Assistance to the developing countries should therefore be increased in order to enable them to establish the necessary infrastructures in that field. In that connection, the Department should provide a contribution within the framework of its programme of assistance.

27. The United Nations Information Centres constituted a vital source of information for the developing countries. It was regrettable that the budgetary resources allocated to them were primarily made available to the information centres in the developed countries, whose citizens, most of the time, were not even aware of their existence, due to the presence of highly-developed public and private information media.

28. The decision to merge some information centres with UNDP field offices was of particular concern. Such a measure did not address the Department's financial problems, since the developing countries contributed substantially to financing the centres. Moreover, the measure would considerably reduce the centres' autonomy.

29. The Department should encourage the information centres by providing them with greater assistance. In particular, the resources available to the centres in Lagos, Dar es Salaam, Dhaka and Bujumbura should be increased, and the centre in Namibia should be made fully functional as soon as possible. The Department should also encourage the information centres in Africa and other developing regions to promote greater awareness of the socio-economic problems of those regions and their recovery and development efforts. Radio and television programmes should give more emphasis to the cultures of the various regions. There should also be budgetary financing for the periodical Africa Recovery, which was the Department's major publication on Africa.

30. His delegation welcomed the Department's cooperation with some regional media organizations, and it hoped that that could be extended to all regions. Such cooperation might make it possible to produce new radio and television programmes.

31. His delegation fully supported the draft resolution submitted by the Bureau of the Committee on Information (A/SPC/47/L.9), and hoped that it would be adopted by consensus.

32. Mrs. ESTEFAN (United States of America) congratulated the Committee on the excellent work that had been accomplished with regard to the draft resolution on information, which underscored the importance and necessity of freedom of the press and freedom of expression. She was pleased that the ideological conflict which had previously marked the Committee's work on questions relating to information was now in the past. It was time to undertake the practical reform needed to strengthen and streamline the

(Mrs. Estefan, United States)

Department of Public Information in such a way as to enhance efficiency at a time when there was increased public scrutiny of the United Nations, given the larger role it was taking in international affairs.

33. The Department of Information was clearly on the right track. It had accomplished a great deal of which it could be proud, particularly concerning the United Nations Information Centres (notably the efforts to integrate them with existing UNDP facilities, thereby minimizing operational costs), the Yearbook of the United Nations, the 1991 edition of which had just been published with the cooperation of a private publisher, and the United Nations information campaign against drug trafficking and drug abuse.

34. Those were examples of Department of Information activities which supported the information function in a cost-effective manner. The United States praised the efforts to consolidate the disparate elements of United Nations information work. Progress was being made, but there was much still to be done. The commitment to consolidation, cost savings and streamlining should be maintained.

35. The United States maintained its position that the Department of Public Information could undertake its important work while keeping costs within the existing budget. It wished to make a few suggestions on the subject: it should identify creative ways to fund United Nations programmes and activities through public and private partnerships, eliminate redundant publications, develop objectives and integrate United Nations Information Centres with other United Nations field offices, particularly those of UNDP.

36. Her delegation also had some comments to make: the Department of Information required greater budgetary flexibility, particularly in the present time of rapid global change, in order to be able to respond without delay; United Nations radio programming should be emphasized, as it was a cost-effective way to further understanding of United Nations programmes and policies; and programme development for the fiftieth anniversary of the United Nations should begin immediately.

37. Mr. KA (Senegal) said that, at a time when the remarkable methods of communication now available had effectively made the world smaller and when, even within individual States, people demanded to be informed about, and closely involved in, the management of their affairs, it was understandable that access to information and the possibility of communication represented a legitimate quest for all peoples and all nations. The new climate of international relations resulting from recent political and economic changes had meant that people previously divided by a wall of prejudices and a lack of understanding had been brought much closer. That climate called on all peoples to engage more in cooperation and exchanges of information and to show a willingness to participate actively in forming public opinion the world over.

(Mr. Ka, Senegal)

38. That did not mean, however, that all countries were able to contribute as they would like to the establishment of the new information and communications order which had been advocated for several years. In fact, in view of the structural imbalances and increasingly acute disparities in the levels of development of different States, the current wide disproportion in the diffusion of information was not surprising. Whoever mastered technological innovations in information clearly controlled the floor, content and direction of that information, and was fully able to regulate and convey the message in question. That being so, the developing countries, and Africa in particular, could not really contribute to the new information order unless they had better access to such advanced technologies, so that they could convey their message.

39. Recourse to information and communications was vital if Africa's energies were to be released and channelled into development and the building of democratic States. Information and the right of citizens to be informed were now key aspirations and demands in terms of development and participatory democracy. In that sense, Senegal had welcomed the Windhoek Seminar for the development of the African press, held in May 1991, and had supported the Declaration of Windhoek, which, in its opinion, constituted significant progress and an important step towards an independent and pluralistic African press. Following the second seminar, held in Kazakhstan in October 1992, his delegation believed that further seminars should be organized in other parts of the world, as such meetings helped to improve the capacity for communication between developing countries and to train journalists in those countries in the latest available techniques.

40. Senegal had ensured that its people always enjoyed freedom of the press and the best illustration of that was that it had a high court, presided over by an independent magistrate, which dealt with audio-visual matters. He welcomed the excellent relations between the United Nations Information Centre in Dakar and the Senegalese authorities, and pointed out that at the centre's request, the Senegalese Minister of Culture had recently decided to dedicate the second Biennial of the Arts of Senegal to human rights in order to commend the positive contribution made by the United Nations to the world-wide promotion of those rights, and that the centre had recently participated in a public debate on the dissemination of the document entitled "An Agenda for peace".

41. His delegation wished to take the opportunity to thank all members of the Committee on Information who had supported and recommended that the General Assembly should approve the candidacy of Senegal and that of the Republic of Korea, for membership in that Committee.

42. Senegal was perfectly aware of the enormous difficulties facing the Organization, particularly the Department of Public Information, which found itself dealing with an increasing volume and variety of requests. In its efforts to enhance efficiency, that Department should, bearing in mind

(Mr. Ka, Senegal)

equitable geographical distribution, redeploy its resources and reorganize some of its services in order to maximize their performance. While his delegation understood the concerns recently expressed by the Secretary-General with respect to restructuring, it was nevertheless somewhat apprehensive about the idea of integrating United Nations Information Centres with the field offices of the United Nations Development Programme. In that regard, Senegal supported the recommendation of the Committee on Information at its fourteenth session to request the submission of a detailed report on the issue before taking any decisions.

43. His delegation had also considered with interest the report of the Committee on Information, and it commended the remarkable work accomplished by the Department of Public Information between the two sessions of the Committee. The Department had provided the world with good coverage of the Rio de Janeiro Conference on Environment and Development and of the historic Security Council summit-level meeting. However, Senegal would like the Department to be more aggressive and to anticipate events so that the international community could be informed in time for it to be able to take the emergency preventive measures required by some situations. The terrible events in Yugoslavia, the tragedy in Somalia and the dire situation in Liberia should be continuously and fully reported to the world, so that appropriate measures could be adopted.

44. The Department of Public Information should also do more to inform international public opinion about the encouraging results achieved by African leaders in their efforts to improve economic performance and bring about stability through the democratization of political systems and thus successfully negotiate the political and economic transition in which most African countries were currently engaged. There was another priority in addition to that dual transition: African economic integration, which would open new windows of opportunity for foreign investors in Africa.

45. He renewed his delegation's support for the activities of UNESCO, which had always been geared to strengthening the communication capacities of developing countries within the framework of the International Programme for Development of Communication. That important Programme deserved support because it helped to reduce the imbalance in the one-way flow of information.

46. Mr. POSSO SERRANO (Ecuador) stressed the importance of information and communication in familiarizing world public opinion with the work of the Organization, especially at a time of unprecedented expansion of the United Nations role in world peace and security and other new sectors. The Organization was active both in its traditional areas - for example, correcting historical wrongs such as colonialism and racism - and in new fields, such as the fight against terrorism and drug trafficking. The United Nations had always done extremely important work as far as respect for human rights and the strengthening of democracies was concerned. It was demonstrating, especially now, that information was really in the service of

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(Mr. Posso Serrano, Ecuador)

humanity, in line with the terms of a consensus achieved two years previously which had established the guidelines for the development of information both in individual countries and in the international community as a whole.

47. One of the important aspects of the Organization's work in that area was to promote a social communication capability in developing countries, in order to lay down the foundations for a new world information and communication order based on mutual trust and the will of all States. The mandate in that regard was not only ethical but was also founded on pragmatism. Its aim was to support and encourage the new world order in order to combat the abuses of the multinational news agencies, disinformation and manipulation of information and other social communication vices. Individual countries must be supported by the international community as a whole in their efforts to eliminate such defects.

48. Whereas the efforts and resources required to achieve that new order would be too much for individual countries to handle, genuine international cooperation would overcome such obstacles. International cooperation was undoubtedly a useful instrument for Ecuador and other third world countries in that it enabled them to compensate for the imbalances stemming from the disparity between the technical capabilities and the resources of countries and to fight against the abuses and distortions of information. The United Nations and the specialized agencies could play the most important role in that connection.

49. Obviously, the consensus that had been achieved two years previously must be preserved, as it constituted an appropriate and balanced framework of principles that reflected the main trends and major requirements of the new international communication order. The Secretary-General had already outlined what had to be done as a result of that consensus: the work must be continued and the strategy of the Department of Public Information must be defined more clearly; the Department of Public Information must be organized in a flexible enough manner to respond to public information requirements at the world level. To achieve that, the Department must have the necessary specialists and equipment.

50. The United Nations Information Centres must be mechanisms for executing the Organization's information policies and not administrative arms whose sole purpose would be to distribute publications. The siting of such centres should neither be the subject of struggles for influence among Member States nor an indication of the status of the host countries. The facilities offered by modern technology and public information resources should make it possible to avoid the proliferation of such centres as simple, poorly equipped and even sometimes superfluous administrative units.

The meeting rose at 5 p.m.